MIXED RELATIONS

THE brig *Elizabeth Barstow* came up the river as though in a hurry to taste again the joys of the Metropolis. The skipper, leaning on the wheel, was in the midst of a hot discussion with the mate, who was placing before him the hygienic, economical, and moral advantages of total abstinence in language of great strength but little variety.

"Teetotallers eat more," said the skipper, finally.

The mate choked, and his eye sought the galley. "Eat more?" he spluttered. "Yesterday the meat was like brick-bats; to-day it tasted like a bit o' dirty sponge. I've lived on biscuits this trip; and the only tater I ate I'm going to see a doctor about directly I get ashore. It's a sin and a shame to spoil good food the way 'e does."

"The moment I can ship another cook he goes," said the skipper. "He seems busy, judging by the noise."

"I'm making him clean up everything, ready for the next," explained the mate, grimly. "And he 'ad the cheek to tell me he's improving—improving!"

"He'll go as soon as I get another," repeated the skipper, stooping and peering ahead. "I

don't like being poisoned any more than you do. He told me he could cook when I shipped him; said his sister had taught him."

The mate grunted and, walking away, relieved his mind by putting his head in at the galley, and bidding the cook hold up each separate utensil for his inspection. A hole in the frying-pan the cook modestly attributed to elbow-grease.

The river narrowed, and the brig, picking her way daintily through the traffic, sought her old berth at Butler's Wharf. It was occupied by a deaf sailing-barge, which, moved at last by self-interest, not unconnected with its paint, took up a less desirable position and consoled itself with adjectives.

The men on the wharf had gone for the day, and the crew of the *Elizabeth Barstow*, after making fast, went below to prepare themselves for an evening ashore. Standing before the largest saucepan-lid in the galley, the cook was putting the finishing touches to his toilet.

A light, quick step on the wharf attracted the attention of the skipper as he leaned against the side smoking. It stopped just behind him, and turning round he found himself gazing into the soft brown eyes of the prettiest girl he had ever seen.

"Is Mr Jewell on board, please?" she asked, with a smile.

"Jewell?" repeated the skipper. "Jewell? Don't know the name."

"He was on board," said the girl, somewhat

taken aback. "This is the *Elizabeth Barstow*, isn't it?"

"What's his Christian name," inquired the skipper, thoughtfully.

"Albert," replied the girl. "Bert," she added as the other shook his head.

"Oh, the cook!" said the skipper. "I didn't know his name was Jewell. Yes, he's in the galley."

He stood eyeing her and wondering in a dazed fashion what she could see in a small, white-faced, slab-sided——

The girl broke in upon his meditations. "How does he cook?" she inquired, smiling.

He was about to tell her, when he suddenly remembered the cook's statement as to his instructor. "He's getting on," he said, slowly; "he's getting on. Are you his sister?"

The girl smiled and nodded. "Ye—es," she said, slowly. "Will you tell him I am waiting for him, please?"

The skipper started and drew himself up: then he walked forward and put his head in at the galley.

"Bert," he said, in a friendly voice, "your sister wants to see you."

"*Who?*" inquired Mr Jewell, in the accents of amazement. He put his head out at the door and nodded, and then, somewhat red in the face with the exercise, drew on his jacket and walked towards her. The skipper followed.

"Thank you," said the girl, with a pleasant smile.

"You're quite welcome," said the skipper.

Mr Jewell stepped ashore and, after a moment of indecision, shook hands with his visitor.

"If you're down this way again," said the skipper, as they turned away, "perhaps you'd like to see the cabin. We're in rather a pickle just now, but if you should happen to come down for Bert to-morrow night——"

The girl's eyes grew mirthful and her lips trembled. "Thank you," she said.

"Some people like looking over cabins," murmured the skipper.

He raised his hand to his cap and turned away. The mate, who had just come on deck, stared after the retreating couple and gave vent to a low whistle.

"What a fine gal to pick up with Slushy," he remarked.

"It's his sister," said the skipper, somewhat sharply.

"The one that taught him to cook?" said the other, hastily. "Here! I'd like five minutes alone with her; I'd give 'er a piece o' my mind that 'ud do her good. I'd learn 'er. I'd tell her wot I thought of her."

"That'll do," said the skipper; "that'll do. He's not so bad for a beginner; I've known worse."

"Not so bad?" repeated the mate. "Not so bad? Why"—his voice trembled—"ain't you going to give 'im the chuck, then?"

"I shall try him for another v'y'ge, George," said the skipper. "It's hard lines on a youngster

if he don't have a chance. I was never one to be severe. Live and let live, that's my motto. Do as you'd be done by."

"You're turning soft-'arted in your old age," grumbled the mate.

"Old age!" said the other, in a startled voice. "Old age! I'm not thirty-seven yet."

"You're getting on," said the mate; "besides, you look old."

The skipper investigated the charge in the cabin looking-glass ten minutes later. He twisted his beard in his hand and tried to imagine how he would look without it. As a compromise he went out and had it cut short and trimmed to a point. The glass smiled approval on his return; the mate smiled too, and being caught in the act, said it made him look like his own grandson.

It was late when the cook returned, but the skipper was on deck, and, stopping him for a match, entered into a little conversation. Mr Jewell, surprised at first, soon became at his ease, and, the talk drifting in some unknown fashion to Miss Jewell, discussed her with brotherly frankness.

"You spent the evening together, I s'pose?" said the skipper, carelessly.

Mr Jewell glanced at him from the corner of his eye. "Cooking," he said, and put his hand over his mouth with some suddenness.

By the time they parted the skipper had his hand in a friendly fashion on the cook's shoulder and was displaying an interest in his welfare as

unusual as it was gratifying. So unaccustomed was Mr Jewell to such consideration that he was fain to pause for a moment or two to regain control of his features before plunging into the lamplit fo'c'sle.

The mate made but a poor breakfast next morning, but his superior, who saw the hand of Miss Jewell in the muddy coffee and the cremated bacon, ate his with relish. He was looking forward to the evening, the cook having assured him that his sister had accepted his invitation to inspect the cabin, and indeed had talked of little else. The boy was set to work house-cleaning, and having gleaned a few particulars, cursed the sex with painstaking thoroughness.

It seemed to the skipper a favourable omen that Miss Jewell descended the companion-ladder as though to the manner born; and her exclamation of delight at the cabin completed his satisfaction. The cook, who had followed them below with some trepidation, became reassured, and seating himself on a locker joined modestly in the conversation.

"It's like a doll's house," declared the girl, as she finished by examining the space-saving devices in the state-room. "Well, I mustn't take up any more of your time."

"I've got nothing to do," said the skipper, hastily. "I—I was thinking of going for a walk; but it's lonely walking about by yourself."

Miss Jewell agreed. She lowered her eyes and looked under the lashes at the skipper.

"I never had a sister," continued the latter, in melancholy accents.

"I don't suppose you would want to take her out if you had," said the girl.

The skipper protested. "Bert takes you out," he said.

"He isn't like most brothers," said Miss Jewell, shifting along the locker and placing her hand affectionately on the cook's shoulder.

"If I had a sister," continued the skipper, in a somewhat uneven voice, "I should take her out. This evening, for instance, I should take her to a theatre."

Miss Jewell turned upon him the innocent face of a child. "It would be nice to be your sister," she said, calmly.

The skipper attempted to speak, but his voice failed him. "Well, pretend you are my sister," he said, at last, "and we'll go to one."

"Pretend?" said Miss Jewell, as she turned and eyed the cook. "Bert wouldn't like that," she said, decidedly.

"N—no," said the cook, nervously, avoiding the skipper's eye.

"It wouldn't be proper," said Miss Jewell, sitting upright and looking very proper indeed.

"I—I meant Bert to come, too," said the skipper; "of course," he added.

The severity of Miss Jewell's expression relaxed. She stole an amused glance at the cook and, reading her instructions in his eye, began to temporize. Ten minutes later the crew of the

Elizabeth Barstow in various attitudes of astonishment beheld their commander going ashore with his cook. The mate so far forgot himself as to whistle, but with great presence of mind cuffed the boy's ear as the skipper turned.

For some little distance the three walked along in silence. The skipper was building castles in the air, the cook was not quite at his ease, and the girl, gazing steadily in front of her, appeared slightly embarrassed.

By the time they reached Aldgate and stood waiting for an omnibus Miss Jewell found herself assailed by doubts. She remembered that she did not want to go to a theatre, and warmly pressed the two men to go together and leave her to go home. The skipper remonstrated in vain, but the cook came to the rescue, and Miss Jewell, still protesting, was pushed on to a 'bus and propelled upstairs. She took a vacant seat in front, and the skipper and Mr Jewell shared one behind.

The three hours at the theatre passed all too soon, although the girl was so interested in the performance that she paid but slight attention to her companions. During the waits she became interested in her surroundings, and several times called the skipper's attention to smart-looking men in the stalls and boxes. At one man she stared so persistently that an opera-glass was at last levelled in return.

" How rude of him," she said, smiling sweetly at the skipper.

She shook her head in disapproval, but the

next moment he saw her gazing steadily at the opera-glasses again.

"If you don't look he'll soon get tired of it," he said, between his teeth.

"Yes, perhaps he will," said Miss Jewell, without lowering her eyes in the least.

The skipper sat in torment until the lights were lowered and the curtain went up again. When it fell he began to discuss the play, but Miss Jewell returned such vague replies that it was evident her thoughts were far away.

"I wonder who he is?" she whispered, gazing meditatingly at the box.

"A waiter, I should think," snapped the skipper.

The girl shook her head. "No, he is much too distinguished-looking," she said, seriously. "Well, I suppose he'll know me again."

The skipper felt that he wanted to get up and smash things; beginning with the man in the box. It was his first love episode for nearly ten years, and he had forgotten the pains and penalties which attach to the condition. When the performance was over he darted a threatening glance at the box, and, keeping close to Miss Jewell, looked carefully about him to make sure that they were not followed.

"It was ripping," said the cook, as they emerged into the fresh air.

"Lovely," said the girl, in a voice of gentle melancholy. "I shall come and see it again, perhaps, when you are at sea."

"Not alone?" said the skipper, in a startled voice.

"I don't mind being alone," said Miss Jewell, gently; "I'm used to it."

The other's reply was lost in the rush for the 'bus, and for the second time that evening the skipper had to find fault with the seating arrangements. And when a vacancy by the side of Miss Jewell did occur, he was promptly forestalled by a young man in a check suit smoking a large cigar.

They got off at Aldgate, and the girl thanked him for a pleasant evening. A hesitating offer to see her home was at once negatived, and the skipper, watching her and the cook until they disappeared in the traffic, walked slowly and thoughtfully to his ship.

The brig sailed the next evening at eight o'clock, and it was not until six that the cook remarked in the most casual manner that his sister was coming down to see him off. She arrived half an hour late, and, so far from wanting to see the cabin again, discovered an inconvenient love of fresh air. She came down at last, at the instance of the cook, and, once below, her mood changed, and she treated the skipper with a soft graciousness which raised him to the seventh heaven. "You'll be good to Bert, won't you?" she inquired, with a smile at that young man.

"I'll treat him like my own brother," said the skipper, fervently. "No, better than that; I'll treat him like your brother."

The cook sat erect and, the skipper being occupied with Miss Jewell, winked solemnly at the skylight.

"I know *you* will," said the girl, very softly; "but I don't think the men——"

"The men'll do as I wish," said the skipper, sternly. "I'm the master on this ship—she's half mine, too—and anybody who interferes with him interferes with me. If there's anything you don't like, Bert, you tell me."

Mr Jewell, his small black eyes sparkling, promised, and then, muttering something about his work, exchanged glances with the girl and went up on deck.

"It is a nice cabin," said Miss Jewell, shifting an inch and a half nearer to the skipper. "I suppose poor Bert has to have his meals in that stuffy little place at the other end of the ship, doesn't he?"

"The fo'c'sle?" said the skipper, struggling between love and discipline. "Yes."

The girl sighed, and the mate, who was listening at the skylight above, held his breath with anxiety. Miss Jewell sighed again and in an absent-minded fashion increased the distance between herself and companion by six inches.

"It's usual," faltered the skipper.

"Yes, of course," said the girl, coldly.

"But if Bert likes to feed here, he's welcome," said the skipper desperately, "and he can sleep aft, too. The mate can say what he likes."

The mate rose and, walking forward, raised

his clenched fists to heaven and availed himself of the permission to the fullest extent of a somewhat extensive vocabulary.

"Do you know what I think you are?" inquired Miss Jewell, bending towards him with a radiant face.

"No," said the other, trembling. "What?"

The girl paused. "It wouldn't do to tell you," she said, in a low voice. "It might make you vain."

"Do you know what I think you are?" inquired the skipper in his turn.

Miss Jewell eyed him composedly, albeit the corners of her mouth trembled. "Yes," she said, unexpectedly.

Steps sounded above and came heavily down the companion-ladder. "Tide's a'most on the turn," said the mate, gruffly, from the door.

The skipper hesitated, but the mate stood aside for the girl to pass, and he followed her up on deck and assisted her to the jetty. For hours afterwards he debated with himself whether she really had allowed her hand to stay in his a second or two longer than necessary, or whether unconscious muscular action on his part was responsible for the phenomenon.

He became despondent as they left London behind, but the necessity of interfering between a goggle-eyed and obtuse mate and a pallid but no less obstinate cook helped to relieve him.

"He says he is going to sleep aft," choked the mate, pointing to the cook's bedding.

"Quite right," said the skipper. "I told him

to. He's going to take his meals here, too. Anything to say against it? "

The mate sat down on a locker and fought for breath. The cook, still pale, felt his small black moustache and eyed him with triumphant malice. " I told 'im they was your orders," he remarked.

" And I told him I didn't believe him," said the mate. " Nobody would. Whoever 'eard of a cook living aft? Why, they'd laugh at the idea."

He laughed himself, but in a strangely mirthless fashion, and, afraid to trust himself, went up on deck and brooded savagely apart. Nor did he come down to breakfast until the skipper and the cook had finished.

Mr Jewell bore his new honours badly, and the inability to express their dissatisfaction by means of violence had a bad effect on the tempers of the crew. Sarcasm they did try, but at that the cook could more than hold his own, and, although the men doubted his ability at first, he was able to prove to them by actual experiment that he could cook worse than they supposed.

The brig reached her destination—Creekhaven—on the fifth day, and Mr Jewell found himself an honoured guest at the skipper's cottage. It was a comfortable place, but, as the cook pointed out, too large for one. He also referred, incidentally, to his sister's love of a country life, and, finding himself on a subject of which the other never tired, gave full rein to a somewhat picturesque imagination.

They were back at London within the fort-

night, and the skipper learned to his dismay that Miss Jewell was absent on a visit. In these circumstances he would have clung to the cook, but that gentleman, pleading engagements, managed to elude him for two nights out of the three.

On the third day Miss Jewell returned to London, and, making her way to the wharf, was just in time to wave farewells as the brig parted from the wharf.

From the fact that the cook was not visible at the moment the skipper took the salutation to himself. It cheered him for the time, but the next day he was so despondent that the cook, by this time thoroughly in his confidence, offered to write when they got to Creekhaven and fix up an evening.

"And there's really no need for you to come, Bert," said the skipper, cheering up.

Mr Jewell shook his head. "She wouldn't go without me," he said, gravely. "You've no idea 'ow particular she is. Always was from a child."

"Well, we might lose you," said the skipper, reflecting. "How would that be?"

"We might try it," said the cook, without enthusiasm.

To his dismay the skipper, before they reached London again, had invented at least a score of ways by which he might enjoy Miss Jewell's company without the presence of a third person, some of them so ingenious that the cook, despite his utmost efforts, could see no way of opposing them.

The skipper put his ideas into practice as soon

as they reached London. Between Wapping and Charing Cross he lost the cook three times. Miss Jewell found him twice, and the third time she was so difficult that the skipper had to join in the treasure-hunt himself. The cook listened unmoved to a highly-coloured picture of his carelessness from the lips of Miss Jewell, and bestowed a sympathetic glance upon the skipper as she paused for breath.

"It's as bad as taking a child out," said the latter, with well-affected indignation.

"Worse," said the girl, tightening her lips.

With a perseverance worthy of a better cause the skipper nudged the cook's arm and tried again. This time he was successful beyond his wildest dreams, and, after ten minutes' frantic search, found that he had lost them both. He wandered up and down for hours, and it was past eleven when he returned to the ship and found the cook waiting for him.

"We thought something 'ad happened to you," said the cook. "Kate has been in a fine way about it. Five minutes after you lost me she found me, and we've been hunting 'igh and low ever since."

Miss Jewell expressed her relief the next evening, and, stealing a glance at the face of the skipper, experienced a twinge of something which she took to be remorse. Ignoring the cook's hints as to theatres, she elected to go for a long 'bus ride, and, sitting in front with the skipper, left Mr Jewell to keep a chaperon's eye on them from three seats behind.

Conversation was for some time disjointed; then the brightness and crowded state of the streets led the skipper to sound his companion as to her avowed taste for a country life.

"I should love it," said Miss Jewell, with a sigh. "But there's no chance of it; I've got my living to earn."

"You might—might marry somebody living in the country," said the skipper, in trembling tones.

Miss Jewell shuddered. "Marry!" she said, scornfully.

"Most people do," said the other.

"Sensible people don't," said the girl. "You hav'n't," she added, with a smile.

"I'm very thankful I hav'n't," retorted the skipper, with great meaning.

"There you are!" said the girl, triumphantly.

"I never saw anybody I liked," said the skipper, "be—before."

"If ever I did marry," said Miss Jewell, with remarkable composure, "if ever I was foolish enough to do such a thing, I think I would marry a man a few years younger than myself."

"Younger?" said the dismayed skipper.

Miss Jewell nodded. "They make the best husbands," she said, gravely.

The skipper began to argue the point, and Mr Jewell, at that moment taking a seat behind, joined in with some heat. A more ardent supporter could not have been found, although his repetition of the phrase, "May and December," revealed a want of tact of which the skipper had

not thought him capable. What had promised to be a red-letter day in his existence was spoiled, and he went to bed that night with the full conviction that he had better abandon a project so hopeless.

With a fine morning his courage revived, but as voyage succeeded voyage he became more and more perplexed. The devotion of the cook was patent to all men, but Miss Jewell was as changeable as a weather-glass. The skipper would leave her one night convinced that he had better forget her as soon as possible, and the next her manner would be so kind, and her glances so soft, that only the presence of the ever-watchful cook prevented him from proposing on the spot. The end came one evening in October. The skipper had hurried back from the City, laden with stores, Miss Jewell having, after many refusals, consented to grace the tea-table that afternoon. The table, set by the boy, groaned beneath the weight of unusual luxuries, but the girl had not arrived. The cook was also missing, and the only occupant of the cabin was the mate, who, sitting at one corner, was eating with great relish.

"Ain't you going to get your tea?" he inquired.

"No hurry," said the skipper, somewhat incensed at his haste. "It wouldn't have hurt *you* to have waited a bit."

"Waited?" said the other. "What for?"

"For my visitors," was the reply.

The mate bit a piece off a crust and stirred his

tea. "No use waiting for them," he said, with a grin. "They ain't coming."

"What do you mean?" demanded the skipper.

"I mean," said the mate, continuing to stir his tea with great enjoyment—"I mean that all that kind'artedness of yours was clean chucked away on that cook. He's got a berth ashore and he's gone for good. He left you 'is love; he left it with Bill Hemp."

"Berth ashore?" said the skipper, staring.

"Ah!" said the mate, taking a large and noisy sip from his cup. "He's been fooling you all along for what he could get out of you. Sleeping aft and feeding aft, nobody to speak a word to 'im, and going out and being treated by the skipper; Bill said he laughed so much when he was telling 'im that the tears was running down 'is face like rain. He said he'd never been treated so much in his life."

"That'll do," said the skipper, quickly.

"You ought to hear Bill tell it," said the mate, regretfully. "I can't do it anything like as well as what he can. Made us all roar, he did. What amused 'em most was you thinking that that gal was cookie's sister."

The skipper, with a sharp exclamation, leaned forward, staring at him.

"They're going to be married at Christmas," said the mate, choking in his cup.

The skipper sat upright again, and tried manfully to compose his features. Many things he had not understood before were suddenly made

clear, and he remembered now the odd way in which the girl had regarded him as she bade him good-night on the previous evening. The mate eyed him with interest, and was about to supply him with further details when his attention was attracted by footsteps descending the companion-ladder. Then he put down his cup with great care, and stared in stolid amazement at the figure of Miss Jewell in the doorway.

"I'm a bit late," she said, flushing slightly.

She crossed over and shook hands with the skipper, and, in the most natural fashion in the world, took a seat and began to remove her gloves. The mate swung round and regarded her open-mouthed; the skipper, whose ideas were in a whirl, sat regarding her in silence. The mate was the first to move; he left the cabin rubbing his shin, and casting furious glances at the skipper.

"You didn't expect to see me?" said the girl, reddening again.

"No," was the reply.

The girl looked at the tablecloth. "I came to beg your pardon," she said, in a low voice.

"There's nothing to beg my pardon for," said the skipper, clearing his throat. "By rights I ought to beg yours. You did quite right to make fun of me. I can see it now."

"When you asked me whether I was Bert's sister I didn't like to say 'no,'" continued the girl: "and at first I let you come out with me for the fun of the thing, and then Bert said it would be good for him, and then—then——"

" Yes," said the skipper, after a long pause.

The girl broke a biscuit into small pieces, and arranged them on the cloth. " Then I didn't mind your coming so much," she said, in a low voice.

The skipper caught his breath and tried to gaze at the averted face.

The girl swept the crumbs aside and met his gaze squarely. " Not quite so much," she explained.

" I've been a fool," said the skipper. " I've been a fool. I've made myself a laughing-stock all round, but if I could have it all over again I would."

" That can never be," said the girl, shaking her head. " Bert wouldn't come."

" No, of course not," asserted the other.

The girl bit her lip. The skipper thought that he had never seen her eyes so large and shining. There was a long silence.

" Good-bye," said the girl at last, rising.

The skipper rose to follow. " Good-bye," he said, slowly; " and I wish you both every happiness."

" Happiness? " echoed the girl, in a surprised voice. " Why? "

" When you are married."

" I am not going to be married," said the girl. " I told Bert so this afternoon. Good-bye."

The skipper actually let her get nearly to the top of the ladder before he regained his presence of mind. Then, in obedience to a powerful tug at the hem of her skirt, she came down again, and accompanied him meekly back into the cabin.

From " Short Cruises "